

Birth Control: a Discussion.

A meeting was held on Tuesday, October 19th, 1920, at Burlington House, under the auspices of the Eugenics Education Society when the problem of birth-control was discussed. Major Leonard Darwin was in the chair.

In his opening remarks, the President explained that he had dealt with this question in his annual address; and that, as it was a subject on which a good deal of difference of opinion existed, it had been decided by the council that an opportunity should be given to the members to discuss it. The views he had expressed were personal to himself, and did not constitute an authoritative expression of opinions of the Society. There were two problems involved, the lessening of fertility amongst the less fit, and the discouragement of birth control amongst the more fit. He hoped that both subjects would be approached by all without prejudice. Medical details would be ruled out of order, though doubtless they should be fully discussed by medical men and women on suitable occasions.

DR. KILLICK MILLARD, Medical Officer of Health for Leicester, then opened the discussion with the following address:—

I have read Major Darwin's able paper with much interest and pleasure. I welcome it for two reasons: (1) On account of its intrinsic value as a thoughtful and scientific contribution to the subject of eugenics; (2) because it indicates, I think, that the Eugenics Education Society is coming to recognise that the question of Birth Control must be faced, and that it is desirable that the attitude of the Society towards this movement be determined.

Whether we like it or not, birth control has come to stay and has got to be reckoned with. It is widely practised amongst just those classes which we are accustomed to regard as the most efficient. It is calculated to have a great and far-reaching effect upon the future of the race. It is, therefore, a subject in which the Eugenics Education Society should be profoundly interested. Certainly it cannot remain indifferent.

We use the term birth control to connote volitional limitation of the size of the family. Those who advocate birth control believe that it is desirable and necessary in the interest, not only of the individual, but of the nation and the whole world to lessen the struggle for existence and the evils which result from it. They further believe that it is neither desirable or necessary, in order to effect this, to mutilate married life by depriving it of the happiness and other fundamental advantages which accrue from the physical union of husband and wife, which after all is and always has been the great distinguishing feature and privilege associated with marriage.

The eugenist has always stood for quality as opposed to quantity. Yet he cannot be indifferent to the question of quantity, for quality

and quantity are inversely correlated and to a large extent in antagonism, so that to obtain the one we usually have to sacrifice the other. It is important, therefore, for the eugenist to decide whether and to what extent mere quantity is desirable or undesirable. If it can be shown that quantity is desirable the eugenist is at a discount, because he is "out" for quality; but if the reverse can be shown, viz., that mere quantity is undesirable, then the eugenist's course is clear.

The human race, like all other forms of life, tends to increase faster than the means of subsistence, and although the potential rate of increase may be slower than in the case of animals lower in the scale of life, it is still very rapid when compared with the epochs of history. In the earlier epochs, when the struggle for existence was acute, the death rate was so high that it nearly equalled the birth rate and increase of population was slow, but during the 18th century, owing to industrial expansion and the fall in the death-rate due to a higher standard of living, a much more rapid rate of increase set in, with the result that the population of England and Wales, which was nine millions at the beginning of that century, had increased to 32½ millions by the end of the century and to 36 millions by 1911; in other words, it had quadrupled in 110 years. During the last quarter of the century, as is well-known, the birth-rate fell greatly—very fortunately as some think—but the death-rate also continued to fall, and population continued to increase.

The result was that during the first ten years of the present century, 1901–1911, although the rate of increase was lower, the actual addition in numbers to the population was greater than in any previous decade and the population of England and Wales increased by no less than 3½ millions. All through this period a totally unnecessary outcry was being made in many quarters about depopulation and "race suicide." Yet a little calculation will show that if the same rate of increase be maintained the population of this country by the end of this century will be 115 millions, whilst by the end of next century—a time which the great-grandchildren of some persons living to-day may well live to see—the population will be 370 millions, or something greater than the present population of India. No thinking person can seriously believe that this country could maintain such a population. For one thing, our coal supply would not hold out. What would happen inevitably would be that long before we reached that point, or anything near it, the standard of life would be so reduced, and the struggle for existence become so keen, that the death-rate would go up and the population would cease to increase so rapidly, and eventually a balance would be struck, and it would remain stationary at just that point where a bare subsistence could be maintained. In other words, we should be reduced to something like the condition prevailing in certain parts of the East, e.g., China, with its "glorious" fertility!

We would emphasise, then, that over-population is inevitable sooner or later unless one of two things happen; either (1) reduction of the birth-rate; or (2) increase in the death-rate. I would suggest that man's intelligence will surely show him—and there is evidence that it is already doing so—that the wiser course is to reduce the birth-rate.

Turning now to Major Darwin's paper, he points out that there is good reason to fear that efficiency and infertility are becoming correlated, and in so far as this comparative infertility is due to birth control (and nearly all those who have studied the question believe that this is the principal cause) we must pronounce birth control, as at present practised, to be distinctly dysgenic in its operation. For it is quite clear that the less efficient sections of the community are multiplying faster than the more efficient.

At the same time, Major Darwin points out that by a strange irony it is probable that the most dysgenic of all forms of birth control is just that one which is recommended by the Churches, and which is usually referred to as "moral restraint." The explanation is that "moral restraint" or "abstinence in marriage" will only be effective with those individuals who are inherently endowed in a special degree with that most desirable quality, self-control, whilst it will be ineffective in the case of those who are lacking in it.

The eugenicist, therefore, cannot pin his faith to this method of restricting fertility.

Major Darwin recognises that from the eugenic point of view there are two possible alternatives: (1) to attempt to abolish birth control by a campaign against it; or (2) to accept it and encourage its further spread so as to reach the lowest and least efficient classes who are at present least affected by it.

As regards (1), even supposing that any attempt of this kind could be successful, which is most unlikely, Major Darwin points out that probably its first effect would be dysgenic. Whilst by encouraging an increased birth-rate population would tend to increase still faster, the struggle for existence would quickly become more acute, poverty, famine, pestilence and war would result and a great increase in the death-rate would be inevitable. Although, ultimately, after many generations, the race might possibly be purified, the process would be quite contrary to the rational aims of eugenicists who wish to substitute more human methods of selection for the cruel methods of nature.

The other alternative (2) is to accept birth control and encourage its spread downwards with a view to reducing the fertility of the less efficient classes.

I wish to urge, with all the earnestness of which I am capable, that this is the right course for the eugenicist to take. The arguments in its favour appear to me to be overwhelming.

1. I believe it to be practicable.
2. It is a continuation and natural development of the present movement; i.e., it is a going forward and not turning back; progress instead of re-action.
3. It is merely teaching and encouraging the less efficient classes to adopt the practice which the more efficient classes have found by experience to be effective and satisfactory.
4. It is giving the less efficient classes something they want and are asking for. Many of the letters written by poor over-burdened mothers of the poorer classes asking for information as to methods of birth control are eloquent proof of this.

In Section 5 of his paper, Major Darwin discussed the question whether the practice of birth control to-day will tend to check the practice in the future. He suggests that those who have an inherent bias in favour of the practice will die out and be replaced by those who are opposed to it.

I think, however, that he overlooks the fact that the being in favour of or opposed to birth control is much more likely to result from education, e.g., propaganda, than from any inborn, and therefore heritable, quality. It is almost certain, that as population gets ever larger and larger the need for restricted fertility will become more and more manifest, so that those in favour of it will continue to increase.

It remains to say a word about the ethical aspect of this question. I am well aware that many worthy people believe that the practice of birth control otherwise than by "moral restraint" is ethically wrong. I wish to say emphatically that I am quite at one with them as to the importance of the moral side of this question, but I firmly believe that nearly all the so-called moral objections to what are often referred to as "artificial" methods of birth control can be fairly met. Some of them rest upon misapprehension; others clearly are due to prejudice. The only one which it seems hopeless to discuss is that which professes to appeal to Divine Authority by quoting isolated texts in the Book of Genesis.

In conclusion I wish to submit that in the birth control movement, if wisely directed, and if properly used and not abused, we have a most valuable eugenic instrument, probably the most valuable at our disposal. It will indeed be a misfortune if eugenists fail to recognise its value and remain content to allow the present unsatisfactory condition of things to remain, under which the more efficient classes are quietly making use of it to their great individual advantage no doubt, but—so long as the less efficient neglect it—to the detriment (from the eugenic point of view) of the race.

The question has got past the experimental stage. Although we have yet much to learn, no doubt, about birth control methods (and serious scientific research is badly wanted) we know enough to justify us in going forward.

The possibility of being able to control his fertility is one of the most momentous discoveries made by human being.

The present widespread movement in favour of reducing the burden of parenthood amongst the poor (the less efficient) and which is coming to consist largely in giving doles, needs closely watching by the eugenicist. In so far as, by improving the environment of the child, it improves the citizen of the next generation, well and good; but in order to prevent its operating dysgenically, through encouraging the less efficient to multiply, it most certainly ought to be accompanied by birth control propaganda. There should be no practical difficulty about this. I believe that the great majority of Health Visitors and Infant Welfare Workers sympathise deeply with the poor and worn-out mother over-burdened by maternity. They see how excessive fertility degrades maternity, neutralises their efforts, and stultifies their work, and is bad for both mother and

child. I believe that they would gladly co-operate as birth control missionaries, once they have official sanction and the approval of public opinion. For this reason I welcome most heartily Major Darwin's outspoken utterance at the end of his paper in favour of his Society adopting a definite Birth Control policy. I share Major Darwin's opinion that endowment of motherhood would probably grow to be dysgenic in its operation.

MR. HOPE-JONES, called upon to open the debate, said that he had still an open mind as to whether birth control was morally right or morally wrong. Much of the evidence was medical, and it was difficult for an outsider either to get hold of it or to analyse it. It was easy for experts to say that these questions were now past the experimental stage, but there were experts on both sides. There was contradictory evidence, and it was too much to ask the ordinary man to throw in his lot at short notice with either side. He felt he was on surer ground in referring to the policy of the Society. If they were a scientific Society and nothing else, they should go ahead oblivious of public opinion. The matter was not to be judged from the point of view either of the Early Church or of Professor Huxley, but as to whether it was going to fill the next generation with better people or worse. They needed to influence public opinion on those matters as to which they were agreed. By adopting the views of Dr. Millard, the Society was in danger of alienating a large section of public opinion. They had not yet made one man in twenty really understand the Eugenic idea. By urging the practice of birth control, or even by denouncing it, they would be alienating a large number of people, and that would be a serious mistake from the point of view of the Society. In a matter like this he did not admit there was any real distinction between ethics and politics. He would sum up his views in the form of a motion which might or might not be put to the meeting. His proposal was:—

“In view of the widely-spread belief that the Eugenics Education Society is advocating artificial methods of birth-limitation, the morality of which is questioned both inside and outside the Society, it is felt that a short statement of its general policy on this question is desirable.

1. In no case does the Society urge upon any class or individual the adoption of such methods. In no case does it favour interference between any individual and his or her medical adviser.

2. Members of the Society who consider these methods right, or who consider them wrong, have as full liberty as any other persons to spread their own views, but have no authority to quote the Society as sanction for such views.

3. By advocating large families in general, and basing its advocacy upon moral motives such as the ambition to become the ancestor of a great race, and to deserve the gratitude of one's children, the Society strives to raise the birth-rate among those to whom these motives can appeal: but in cases where the higher appeal fails to overcome material motives for sterility, and selfishness is found to be exterminating itself, it is opposed to the stimulation of the birth-rate by threats, by bribery, or by denunciation.

4. Eugenists are agreed that in some sections of the community the birth-rate needs to be reduced, but have no intention of overriding moral or religious considerations in their attempts to attain this end.

5. Eugenists, because they believe that man exists for some greater end than self-seeking, and that in matters connected with reproduction this fact requires especial emphasis, feel the need for co-operation with all bodies, religious or otherwise, which stand for the same fundamental belief."

DR. B. DUNLOP said he approached the subject from the unanswerable Malthusian standpoint. The food supply of the world—and of most countries, including Britain—was only increased at the slow rate of one, or less, per cent a year, even before the war. Consequently, populations could only be increased slowly; in other words, a low birth-rate was necessary in order to eliminate poverty. A low birth-rate being thus necessary, the eugenic policy was to have a very low birth-rate among the poor. The early Neo-Malthusians urged that birth control information should be spread amongst the poor. But this was hindered by the opposition of religionists and socialists; consequently birth control had been a very dysgenic process. They did not disregard positive eugenics, for they held that a very low birth-rate amongst the poor would enable the fitter classes to contribute the larger proportion of children to the population. Thus he did not agree with Major Darwin that birth control would lead to the elimination of the fitter stocks. Practically everyone would marry and have children when a low birth-rate had made it economically possible. Again, the poor were generally most eager to get birth control information; and if they were encouraged to adopt it, he could imagine few not doing so in their own obvious interests. Thus poverty would be eliminated and race improvement established by the poor having one or two children, and the better off classes two, three or four. Intemperance created a difficulty, but it was fortunately much less amongst women; moreover, the birth control methods employed by the woman were being increasingly regarded as the best.

DR. MARIE STOPES said that every child born sent up the birth-rate for one year, and sent it down for at least nineteen years if it lived. As the population got larger and larger the birth-rate must steadily run down. Dangerous phrases were loosely used by Councillor Clark and all sorts of imbeciles who did not understand the meaning of vital statistics. She felt she had an earnest prophetic and God-given mission, and she asked them to read the last two chapters of her new book, "Radiant Motherhood." It was written absolutely for the next generation, and described the only way in which women could bring forth the type of children of which they wanted the next generation to be made up. Dr. Stopes went on to relate her efforts in regard to challenging the reservation issued in connection with the report of the second Birth-rate Commission of which she was a member, and explained that whereas those who signed the reservation condemned all scientific methods of control on "medical evidence," none of the signatories had been able to substantiate this and produce any medical facts from the evidence heard by the Commission.

MR. R. A. FISHER said the subject was not new. Throughout history there had been intentional limitation of offspring due to economic motives and sometimes advocated from patriotic reasons. There had been infanticide and foeticide. Against these practices an extraordinarily powerful moral opinion had grown up through the centuries. In all civilizations the prevailing religion condemned infanticide. The reason for the changed opinion was that those to whom infanticide was repugnant, left children in greater numbers, and those who murdered their infants disappeared from the face of the earth. Among the Greeks and the early Norseman, infanticide was practised without scruple. The Arabs, before the time of Mohammed, practised female infanticide from a high conscientious and moral aim as a duty towards their tribe. The early preaching of Mohammed, marked a revulsion due to instinct and conscience. Personally he could not distinguish between instinct and conscience. He proceeded to cite Greek and Roman writers to show the same change of feeling in regard to abortion. In the next century he thought there would be similar revulsion against the employment of contraceptives. There would be a gradual elimination of those types who from reasons, however high-minded and conscientious, were willing to limit their progeny.

MRS. MARGARET SANGER, editor of the American "Birth Control Review," met the objection that the poor would not adopt birth control by giving an account of her recent investigations in Rotherhithe, where for some years, through the efforts of Miss Anna Martin, poor women had been taught a method of birth control, with great benefit to both mothers and children.

DR. ALICE DRYSDALE VICKERY related her experiences in the matter of promoting birth control during the last forty years. She was convinced that the disastrous and dysgenic condition of so large a section of the population of to-day would have been avoided had the relatively poor people of forty years ago been told in simple language the theory of population, and the hygienic method of birth control. No set of human beings had the right to deprive others of information conducive to their well-being. Poor people, poor women especially, had been deliberately deprived of the power of using their own judgment in regard to what was beneficial for themselves and their offspring. The result was the limitation of families amongst the well-to-do, side by side with the birth and survival of the unfit. The agencies which produced dysgenic effects had increased and multiplied. But the women of the poorer class were demanding to-day that information which had benefited the better classes. It was not natural that a poor woman should desire to bring into the world one child after another without proper intervals of rest and recuperation. The nation needs an A.1. population, it will attain that ideal when all women shall be properly instructed in matters of sexual and social hygiene and the regulation of conception, so that they may give the nation what it needs; and that is a population in which every child shall be well-born.

DR. KILLICK MILLARD, at the request of the Chairman, said a few words in reply. He welcomed the opportunity to exchange ideas with those who differed from them. Their Society was certainly a

scientific Society formed to study what was beneficial for the future of the race. If birth-control were equally exercised by all classes, the results would no longer be dysgenic, and that was a strong argument for going forward. He was much interested in Mr. Fisher's historical references, but there was a great difference between infanticide or abortion, and the prevention of conception. To-day the churches with few exceptions were in favour of prudence in the married state. Their changed attitude from the old idea of "be fruitful and multiply" represented an enormous advance. The churches were coming to recognise that it was not right that people should have more children than they could properly bring up.

MR. HOPE-JONES said a few more words. He felt they should hammer home the points on which they were agreed with a view to convert public opinion. Such a course was morally and scientifically right. To bring in side issues with the hope of influencing a mere section of public opinion was morally and scientifically wrong.